Pam-India

Baptist Missionary Society.

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How can we best use our Present Opportunity among the Nama Sudras?

A paper read before the Bengal Conference, March 3rd—10th, by the Rev. John Reid of Jessore.

It is not necessary for me to say much as to what is known as the Nama Sudra Movement. A number of you are working among the Nama Sudras and are in close touch with what is happening. To most of you I took the liberty of sending a pamphlet which was written for the Calcutta Missionary Conference, and which contained an imperfect summary of the movement. A good deal of the information was kindly supplied by yourselves, so there is all the less need for repeating it.

Building on our common knowledge of the social awakening that is fast taking the place of their age-long sleep, and of the efforts they are making, by mass meetings, the opening of schools, and by other means, to secure their uplift and progress, I wish to emphasize very briefly the opportunity it affords us as missionaries and discuss some points as to our use of the opportunity.

Our Opportunity.

It has to be admitted that the movement is so far largely a social one, nor is that strange. Taking it as such I still believe, as Mr. Carey said in that excellent address of his to the Nama Sudras, which appeared in the *News Letter*, "There is behind it a great persuasion of God." A social movement is not one to be afraid of, even if a socialist one is. The social relations and conditions of men were recognized by the Christ Himself and are gaining increasing recognition from the Churches of today. As a social movement there is in it a revolt against the tyranny of the oppressors who have far too long held them in the degradation of ignorance and in the bondage of serfdom.

There is also a revolt against priestism—at any rate against the priestism which regards them as outside the pale of religion and society, *asprishya chandal.* So that there is a religious side to the social movement, and it is because of what it is leading on to rather than what it is now, that I believe the movement gives us a unique opportunity for extending the Kingdom of Christ. On the darkness of their ignorance and degradation the light of new hopes and aspirations has dawned. In this, as messengers of the Gospel of Light, we may rejoice. So long as they were content to accept their degraded position as their fate, the presentation of a life of liberty in Christ might well seem impossible to them. Serfdom or slavery destroys the higher feelings and debases the moral senses of men. This has been sadly the case with the Nama Sudras. Is it not of God that they are discovering they are men just as much as the higher castes? Until a man believes in himself, he is not so likely to believe in God.

When the subject of the social conditions of the lower classes was discussed in the Decennial Conference of 1892 one of the speakers said—and his words may well be applied to the Nama Sudras: "The great and significant fact for us is that a new "life has entered into this people. They are no longer content "to remain ignorant and degraded; they believe that the time "has come to improve their condition, and assert their rights; "they appeal to us in Christ's name for sympathy and help. Some "brethren look on the movement with something akin to fear "and suspicion, and dread any action which would tend to "make the people discontented with their lot. I have no "sympathy with such timid doubters. Our Lord Jesus took "up no such position, where there is injustice and oppression "his message is not peace but a sword. 'I came not to send "peace but a sword.' As Christian men and women, above "all as Christian missionaries, we are bound to do all that lies "in our power to help these people to throw off their bondage."

Another speaker, Rev. J. Stone, of the C.M.S., dealing with the opportunities afforded by the social conditions of the lower classes, said: "The opportunities are great, they are immense. "The lower classes of this country are beginning to realise that "it is only through Christianity they can rise. They feel that "missionaries are their friends, and doubtless many enter the "Christian Church from no higher motive than 'to do better' "as they often express it. But even in this way by careful "teaching and the Holy Spirit's help many have come, and are "still coming, to a saving knowledge of the truth as it is in "Jesus."

Does not the history of Christianity show that social upheavals often precede or accompany spiritual movements? Fisher, in his

"History of the Church," describing the conditions of Germany before the Reformation says: "The peasants, goaded almost to despair by the hardships of their position, were ready to raise the standard of revolt." The Peasants' Rising that resulted, and its excesses, are well known to you all, as well as the marvellous spread of the work of the Reformation in that land. Nor was it only so in Germany. The Lollardism and the Peasants' Revolt of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries prepared the way in our own country for the same glorious Reformation.

The comparison of the Nama Sudra movement and the Peasants' Rising or Lollardism may seem rather far-fetched. That there are points of resemblance we must all admit, and hope that in its own way the smaller movement may have as glorious a sequel. However, it will be more pertinent to look to the more recent history of Christianity in India for a sign by which to interpret the present movement or anticipate its future.

Of the thousands won by Schwartz in Trichinopoly and Tanjor, and by Rhenus and others in the Tinnevelly district, or of the Tranquebar mass movements, I cannot fully speak. The converts were won largely from the Shanar caste, and that there was a social element in the movement cannot, I suppose, be doubted. The same is true of the more recent movement in North India, also among low-caste people, especially Chamars.

The Telugu is, for us, the most interesting and perhaps most instructive field to study. The Rev. L. L. Uhl, A.L.M., of Guntur, Madras, speaking of his part of that field, says: "We have "had all the various movements of the people towards the "Gospel; first and earliest the accession of an individual here and "there, then a few individuals in occasional instances, again a "family coming together, then accessions of a number of families "at one time, after many years the movement of a large "portion of single villages, and finally a succession of large "accessions from each village. Mass movements over wide "areas are illustrated by the ingathering of the Mádigas, as if by "some sudden impulse, in the American Baptist and the General "Synod Lutheran Mission for about the years 1870-80, and to "which movement the great Madras famine of 1877-79 was a "stimulus, but of which it was not the origin." In a summary of the reasons which have influenced these movements he mentions, among other things: famine and scarcity; wish for schools; marriage alliances to be made; property to be preserved; hope of employment; quarrels with the lower classes or disputes with the upper classes. He admits that many of the masses are in no sense converts, though they are being taught to observe all things which Christ has commanded.

Compared with these the motives which are so far prompting the Nama Sudras are very favourable, though their case may

not be as promising as that of the Telugus of the American Baptist Missionary Union Field. Yet Dr. Downie, in his history of the Telugu Mission, says : " It is useless to deny that there " was a very close connection between the famine and the large " accessions which followed it. We do not say that the relation " was that of cause and effect, for in that case we should have to " account for the fact that in many places there was the cause " but no corresponding effect. But that the famine was one of " the links in the chain of causes we have no more doubt than we " have that the famine in Egypt was one of the steps in Joseph's " elevation to the governorship and his consequent blessing to " his own people." So that even in the illustrious Lone Star Mission with its 2,222 baptisms in one day and its 9,606 from June 15th to December 31st, 1878, there was a social link in the change of causes that have produced such marvellous results.

May we not fully hope that, as in other parts of India among similar races, the present social movement among the Nama Sudras is but a link, in a not very long chain of causes, at the end of which there will be a mass movement into the Kingdom of God? There is the breaking away from the Hindu Society which spurns them, though not yet from the Hindu religion which has condemned them to their condition of servitude. There is the admission on the part of many that they must ultimately become Christian. What is better, there is in many places a very deep interest in the Gospel we preach to them.

Our experience in Jessore has made us most optimistic with regard to the future of our work among the Nama Sudras. During the last two years we have spent a great deal of time intinerating among their villages and attending their mass meetings. There comes to my mind the case of a very large gathering which had met for the consideration of the progress of their race. Night had come and lamps were being lit before we finished. Yet they listened with keen appreciation as we showed them that only through Christ could they rise to the true life of eternal progress. Speaking personally, it was one of the finest experiences I have had, and I thought I saw not the falling night but the dawning day where lamps gave place to the clear shining of the sun. In one part of our district, where we have done most work among the Nama Sudras, many say they desire to become Christians. In some cases it is, I believe, a genuine desire, and there is, I trust, the beginning of a really spiritual movement.

Other brethren can speak of similar experiences and hopes. There are the ones and twos which, acccording to the testimony of Mr. Uhl, are the harbingers of large companies. Even if there were not these, seeing, as Mr. Carey recognized in his address, the Nama Sudras have made the Missionaries their guides,

what a chance is ours! Let it be only a qualified surrender of their destinies which they are making to the Missionaries; let it be admitted that it is the fruits of Christianity rather than Christ which is attracting them. Still, when a depressed race with new-born desires and aspirations place themselves at all in our care, it is a sacred trust that brings with it a great opportunity and as great a responsibility.

II. Our Policy.

In view of what is happening and what may follow in the future, what should be our policy as a Mission in whose fields there are over a million Nama Sudras? Or, as our subject asks, how can we best use our present opportunity among them?

One great question meets us on the threshold of our enquiry. Are we prepared to work for a mass movement? In view of what has happened elsewhere and of what is happening among the Nama Sudras, who are a gregarious people, I submit that such a movement is possible. When we remember what happened in the Bakarganj and Faridpur districts in the days of Mr. J. Chamberlain Page, we may conclude that once a beginning is made a large ingathering is probable. It may be delayed. It may begin before long. Should it begin, have we, as a Mission, the means of dealing with it? Things are not now as they were in the days of Mr. Page. There is not the same elasticity of Mission funds there was then. Both the money and the men at the disposal of the Mission are very largely occupied with other important work. Is it not well we should take stock before we go further, that we sit down and reckon whether with our small army and limited supplies we are able to go to meet the masses which may come in our direction at any time?

Broadly speaking there are two policies possible for us,—the two contrasted by Bernard Lucas in his book "The Empire of Christ." We may seek to save a few survivors from the Nama Sudra wreck, or we may try to salvage the ship, survivors and all. If we are to adopt the former plan, then we may go on, as we are doing, making an occassional tour in the Nama Sudra district getting hold of a convert here and there. We had better avoid the mass meetings which the Nama Sudras are holding now in almost every district, for no one can take part in these without encouraging and appealing to the whole community to come out from their bondage of Hindu degradation into the liberty of the children of God. But to adopt that policy would be to miss one of the finest opportunities that have come to us in Bengal to magnify the name of Christ among the heathen. Besides, I am persuaded that with the material we have to work on, if we work for conversions at all, we shall get them in large numbers. At

any rate we shall have many coming, asking to join the Christian community.

Suppose it happens so, and I am not supposing an unlikely thing. Last year in Magurah a meeting was convened by some Nama Sudra leaders to consider the question of joining the Christian community. It was spoiled by the efforts of the caste Hindus, but the raising of the question at all made Mr. Mukerji and me (whom he invited to preside at the meeting) feel that we should like to know the mind of Conference on the subject. What answer should we have given had they asked to join our community ?

Someone may suggest that there can be no joining of the community without joining the church. But I find in the old records that in Barisal during the ingathering, when there were only six or seven hundred church members, there were two or three thousand nominal Christians. They had come over, as we say, though they were not ready for baptism. In Tinnevelly the S.P.G., when they had the great mass movement, kept the people a year or two under instruction before baptizing them. They regarded these under instruction as adherents.

But that is not the most important point. I take it if a group of people or a village want to join us, none of us would say them nay. All the same it would be a fatal mistake to receive in any way, even as enquirers, people whom we cannot instruct.

Until we know the magnitude of a movement we cannot very fully discuss as to how far we can cope with it, yet we should prepare ourselves, as far as possible, for the contingencies of the future and decide on a common policy for all working among Nama Sudras to pursue.

All will be agreed that we should go on touring, as much as we can, with our limited travelling allowances, among the Nama Sudras. It means in most cases long tours, for they live mostly in the Beels far removed from the central station. And it will mean to the missionary a good many disappointments, as he finds that his reduced travelling allowance will not admit of many such tours, delightful and successful as they are. All will be agreed too that, whenever we get the chance, we should attend their mass meetings and conferences, sympathising with their aspirations in so far as they are good, encouraging them in the establishment of Primary Schools, helping them to get Local Board Grants, and above everything else pointing them to Jesus Christ as the one in whom their highest aspirations can be more than realised. Christian literature too should be disseminated widely among them, and our best Mission workers should be set apart for the work among the Nama Sudras.

All that is sowing, and of course we must continue to sow and to water that which we have sown. The sowing we may manage

to an extent and after a sort. But suppose we have to thrust in the sickle to reap, what then? Suppose a village or group of villages or only a few people of a village far out in the Beels want to become Christians, how shall we instruct them? In view of our limited staff and reduced funds it would be impossible to place a preacher in or near that village or group of villages. We ought at least to be able to open a Mission school with a teacher who could help to instruct inquirers as well as teach the children. Even now the people, keen on education as they are, are asking for Mission schools. If as a Mission we were able to take a liberal part in the education of these newly-awakened people, we should find it a most excellent way of securing them for the Church of Jesus Christ. They are willing to pay a good deal for their education. In one village in Jessore where we have opened an Upper Primary School, the Nama Sudras are building a school-house and a teacher's house. They are also willing to pay a small fee for their scholars. Still they are mostly a poor people and will need help, far more than Government or the District Board is likely to give them; and they need good teachers more than anything. Could we but supply them! Had we but ready to hand a company of those teacher-preachers, of whom Dr. Howells in one of his papers on Serampore speaks, what a splendid work they could do among the awakening Nama Sudras! But we are only preparing the machinery that is going to prepare the men. And it looks as if the machinery will so exhaust the financial energies of the Church that a liberal policy among the Nama Sudras will be impossible. If we expect great things we shall have to make a great effort to realise them.

The Nama Sudras stand to-day at what I believe is the parting of the ways. Shall we guide them or shall we leave it to others who have no gospel to give them? In the Narail Sub-Division of Jessore there is a Brahmo mission begun. A Brahmo missionary and two Nama Sudra teachers are conducting a school and making other efforts for the education of this depressed community as they term them. I met the missionary the other day at a Nama Sudra Conference, and I felt as never before that we have an opportunity among the Nama Sudras which others will use if we fail to do so.

In shaping our policy we do well to remember that there are dangers attached to the work among the Nama Sudras. These are of two particular kinds. Firstly, in view of the ill-feeling that has arisen between the caste Hindus and the non-caste Nama Sudras, our efforts among the latter may displease the former and make our work among them more difficult. Besides, if we were to receive these non-caste people in large numbers into the Church, it might happen as, I believe, it happened with the

A.B.M.U. in Ongole, caste Hindus may refuse to come to us. The second kind of danger is the more important. Mass movements may lead to the accession to our community of many whose lives have not been changed though they have changed the name of their religion. This has happened both in South India and in North India. Unless we are very careful and very prayerful the movement will remain largely a social one. It is enough to state these dangers. They are the dangers incident to a great opportunity. We dare not miss the opportunity because of the dangers. We can only try to avoid them as far as possible by being filled with the Spirit of wisdom and of power. As Baptists we stand for the individual conversion before admission to the church, so that while we see in the Nama Sudras a whole community to be won for Christ, we see in each individual a heart to be subdued. Though the movement is so far a social one, with the favourable conditions it provides for evangelistic work and the spiritual dynamic we have in Jesus Christ, we may well dare the dangers and look for a great spiritual awakening that will change the whole position of the Church of Christ in Bengal.

Summarising that which has been said as to our policy and to provide a basis for our discussion I beg respectfully to submit the following proposals :—

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NOTE :—The proposals referred to are in a modified form embodied in No. 2-8 of the following resolutions of Conference.

RESOLUTIONS.

RESOLVED—

I. That this Conference interprets the awakening among the Nama Sudras as a call from God to make a special effort for the evangelisation of that community.

II. That recognising the greatness of the present opportunity for winning the Nama Sudras for Jesus Christ, we earnestly appeal to the churches in Bengal, especially those in or near Nama Sudra districts, to identify themselves with a forward Missionary movement among their neighbours either by individual effort, by *Sangkirtan* parties, or by the support of representatives to work among them.

III. That we earnestly appeal to the churches at home, through the Committee, to make it possible for us to embrace the present unique opportunity among the Nama Sudras.

IV. That we concentrate upon this work as far as we can, setting apart the most suitable workers for itinerating among the Nama Sudras and teaching those who become enquirers.

V. That we favour the opening of Mission schools under Chrstian teachers only, so far as funds and suitable men are available. Precedence should be given to places where there are people seeking instruction for baptism.

VI. That in all schools moderate charges be made for the support of education.

VII. That if a group of individuals or villages ask to join the Christian community, we can receive them into the community only on condition that they at once forsake idolatry, promise to keep the Lord's Day, and place themselves under Christian instruction and discipline; and further that we do not receive those for whom we are unable to provide such instruction.

VIII. That the missionaries working among the Nama Sudras, *viz.*, Messrs. Reid (Convener), Mukerji, Noble, Ransford, Sircar, Teichmann and Wenger, form themselves into a Committee for mutual advice and help so as to maintain as far as possible a common policy in their work. (The Indian Secretary is *ex officio* a member of this Committee.)

B.M.P.—Calc.